East Asia Seminar Series

At the University of Cambridge

Professor Karl Friday

‘Mettle of Honour: Shaping the Rules of War in Early Medieval Japan’

It would be difficult to find any facet of Japan’s cultural heritage that exercises as powerful a hold on popular imagination as the samurai, who have been both celebrated as the righteous and honor-obsessed heroes of movies, television programs, and video games; and vilified as the source for the most unsavory aspects of Imperial Army behavior during World War II—and of subsequent Japanese business practices. Neither image is particularly accurate or useful, and both derive in large measure from fanciful comparisons with Western military traditions. And indeed, intriguing similarities—and equally tantalizing differences in technology and circumstance—between the knights of medieval Europe and the warriors of medieval Japan beguile observers and beckon to comparing eyes. This talk will examine three ideas central to Western ideals concerning the conduct of war, as these relate to early samurai warfare, highlighting the very different socio-political worlds in which these two cultures evolved.

Karl F. Friday (PhD, Stanford 1989) is Professor in the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Saitama University, and Professor Emeritus at the University of Georgia. A specialist in the late classical and early periods, and on Japanese warrior culture, his publications include Hired Swords: The Rise of Private Warrior Power in Early Japan (Stanford, 1992), Legacies of the Sword: the Kashima Shinryu & Samurai Martial Culture (University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), Samurai, Warfare and the State in Early Medieval Japan (Routledge, 2004), The First Samurai: the Life & Legend of the Warrior Rebel Taira Masakado (Wiley, 2008), Japan Emerging: Premodern History to 1850 (Westview, 2012), The Routledge Handbook of Premodern Japanese History (Routledge, 2017), and numerous shorter works.

All are welcome // Monday 16 October // 2017 // 5-7pm
Free to attend
Rooms 8/9
Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CB3 9DA

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